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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SINIORA ADVOCATES PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE
BASED ON PRINCIPLES

REF: SECSTATE 148539

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
) .

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a 10/29 meeting with the Ambassador, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora recommended simultaneous pursuit of two options regarding presidential elections. First, he urged continued push for an absolute majority ("half plus one") election, despite the fact that March 14 might not be able to pull it off and that Patriarch Sfeir does not like it. Second, he asked that the USG help lock in agreement on a set of principles (for example, UNSCR 1701, Siniora's seven-point plan, and the National Dialogue's four decisions) that would bind the elected president and subsequent government. He suggested exploring this approach when the Secretary meets her counterparts in Istanbul. Siniora also

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mused that the Patriarch might ultimately give names, but his expectations regarding the quality of candidates the Patriarch might name were low. In the event of a vacuum, Siniora believes the more likely outcome is that President Lahoud will stay in office, extending the status quo, rather than form a second government. Regarding fund-raising efforts for the Special Tribunal, Siniora reported that he suggested to the UN Secretary General that the UN and Lebanon undertake joint efforts. He also made a pitch for help in reforestation, after devastating forest fires in Lebanon's north and Chouf regions. End summary.

STRATEGY FOR SUCCESSFUL ELECTIONS

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met with Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and advisor Mohamad Chatah on October 29. The Ambassador opened the meeting by briefing Siniora on the message the U.S. is delivering regarding potential actions that might be taken against individuals who participate in a second cabinet or who take steps to undermine Lebanon's legitimate institutions. The PM expressed appreciation.

¶3. (C) Regarding Secretary Rice's upcoming Istanbul meeting, Siniora laid out two tracks that he sees are

possible outcomes of the elections and how the USG can play a supporting role. He dubbed the first the "confrontation track," whereby a president is elected with a half plus one majority. The Patriarch, he noted, does not support this track because he fears the consequences. The Patriarch also opposes a vacuum in the presidency during which the Siniora government fills the void. Siniora remarked that moving forward without the Patriarch's support is "suicide." The confrontation track assumes that March 14 is able to garner a half plus one majority, an assumption which is not a done-deal, commented Siniora.

14. (C) The second track is to elect a president who meets a minimum set of requirements by supporting specific principles: support for UNSCR 1701 (emphasis on disarming Hizballah), the seven-point proposal Siniora put forward to end the summer 2006 war and the four decisions resulting from the spring 2006 National Dialogue. Whoever is elected, Siniora posited, should then be bound by these principles.

15. (C) Siniora recommended that the first track - half plus one strategy - remain on the table as a driving force encouraging MPs to attend the parliamentary session, regardless of whether it is achievable by March 14. (Siniora reported that he believes France will accept a candidate elected with a half plus one majority, but would prefer to avoid this scenario.) At the same time, Siniora urged that, simultaneously, we also pursue the second track. Pursuing this second track entails assessing how to improve the chances of a candidate who supports the identified principles, and then soliciting support from the Patriarch, the Vatican, and other countries for this strategy. Siniora recommended that Secretary Rice work on these agreed principles with the attendees at her side-meetings in Istanbul. It would also be beneficial for the USG to emphasize, in Istanbul and externally, the MPs' civic obligation to vote. Siniora emphasized that the Patriarch must play an active role in this process because the

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Patriarch may decide to suggest names, irrespective of the principled approach, out of fear of a vacuum or a half plus one president.

IF THE PATRIARCH SUGGESTS NAMES...

16. (C) Siniora relayed that he sent a representative (Radwan Sayegh) to visit the Patriarch on October 27 and, from this visit, got the impression that the Patriarch may ultimately choose to suggest names, one from pro-government forces, one from the opposition, and one who falls in the middle. Siniora noted that in such a scenario, the candidate who falls in the middle would most likely be the winner. Siniora speculated that, ideally, the Patriarch might suggest someone young and new. On the other hand, he expected that any names from the Patriarch could include former Bar Association head Shakib Qortbawi, from the National Bloc, and former President Amine Gemayel -- neither of whom qualify as being young or new. He did not think the Patriarch would choose former Minister of Finance Demianos Kattar. Siniora said he will try to find out whether the Patriarch is still supporting John Obeid, Fares Bouez or Charles Rizk, and he will also press the Patriarch to support the second track based on agreed principles.

17. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's suggestion that the Patriarch announce his intention to attend the November 12 parliament session himself in order to build momentum for MP attendance, Siniora was receptive, on the condition that Speaker Nabih Berri does indeed call for the session. However, if Berri does not call for one, then it would be too divisive for the Patriarch to show up. He said that MP Michel Murr has been the most outspoken in supporting this idea.

18. (C) Siniora did not appear confident that the recent flurry of meetings between party leaders will produce a breakthrough. However, he was more optimistic about tangible results from Saudi King Abdallah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud's meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Secretary Rice's meetings in Istanbul. He also said that he will ask Acting Foreign Minister Tareq Mitri, currently in Geneva, to meet with the Vatican's Secretary for Relations with States Archbishop Dominique Mamberti.

LAHOUD LIKELY TO STAY IN OFFICE
IF NO PRESIDENT IS ELECTED

19. (C) Siniora reported that Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit, in his October 25th visit to Lebanon, did not say he supported a constitutional amendment (despite media reports to the contrary) and cautioned President Emile Lahoud against forming a second government. Siniora believes Lahoud is no longer considering forming a second government, but instead is thinking to stay in office until a president is elected, regardless of what happens by the midnight November 23 deadline. In the event that no president is elected, Lahoud (who denies the existence of the Siniora cabinet) believes his departure would create a vacuum, an outcome to avoid.

REVIEWING OTHER CANDIDATES

110. (C) In response to the Ambassador's inquiry as to whether there is truth to the rumor that former MP Suleiman Franjeh is plotting his candidacy while on a hunting trip to France, Siniora laughed. Noting that Franjeh hoped to be elected if the March 14 majority became the parliamentary minority, the PM commented that the March 14 rejection of the two-thirds quorum would then be a tool seized upon by Franjeh: "that is the majority cooking the poison,, only so they are then forced to eat it." Siniora labeled Franjeh's purported plot a "fantasy."

111. (C) Upon hearing that Gilbert Chagoury, a Nigeria-based wealthy industrialist known to have funded (and might still be doing so) Michel Aoun, is accompanying Franjeh in France, Siniora suggested that the U.S. deliver to Chagoury a stern message about the possibility of financial sanctions and travel bans against those who undermine Lebanon's legitimate institutions. He also dismissed Central Bank Governor Riad

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Salameh's candidacy as implausible, calling it "too flagrant because it would be like electing Syrian President Bashar al-Asad to be Lebanon's next president." On MP Nassib Lahoud, Siniora commented that he is the best half plus one candidate and the only one from the entire list of Maronite presidential candidates who deserves to be elected.

SLEIMAN'S VISIT TO EGYPT

112. (C) Siniora noted that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak called to brief him on Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman's October 21 visit to Egypt. Mubarak relayed that he focused the meeting on praising Sleiman for the army's efforts during the Nahr al Barid fighting. When Sleiman told Mubarak that Lebanon needed a president that pleases Syria, Mubarak agreed that positive relations with Syria are an important consideration, but that it should be on the basis of mutual respect. Mubarak told Siniora that was the extent of election-talk.

113. (C) Siniora acknowledged that Sleiman still appears to be Syria's preferred candidate. As for himself, Siniora is maintaining a positive relationship with Sleiman. He said Sleiman consulted with him prior to his visit to Egypt, and then briefed him upon his return. He hears that Sleiman is

making positive statements about him and he is doing the same, praising his role as General. Along these lines, Siniora is planning to host an event with Sleiman, all of the officers, and the heads of the Eighth Regiment to express his appreciation for the LAF.

FURTHER REFUTING OF U.S.
MILITARY BASE RUMOR

¶14. (C) Siniora and his advisors are strategizing on how to quell the continuing furor over the rumor that the U.S. plans to build military bases in Lebanon. Ideas include reaching out to retired military officers to make a statement and providing statements to friendly, credible journalists. Meanwhile, Siniora asked the Ambassador to make a brief, firm statement denying (again) the allegation. It is Siniora's assessment that this entire ordeal was crafted by Syrian intelligence. Siniora stated his belief that additional refuting by the Ambassador would be helpful. (Note: Per Siniora's request, the Embassy issued a press statement later that day reiterating that the story is not true. End Note)

SPECIAL TRIBUNAL FUNDING

¶15. (C) When asked about funding progress for the Special Tribunal, Siniora said he spoke to UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon and suggested the UN and Lebanon join forces to reach out to potential donors to raise funds. Siniora is waiting for an answer from the UN to his proposal. The Ambassador inquired whether it might be a good idea for Naziq Hariri, Rafiq's widow, to undertake a fund-raising tour; Siniora (who does not like Nazek, who in turn detests him) was non-committal, noting that potential donors would wonder why she isn't footing the bill herself.

¶16. (C) Noting that the cabinet had approved the 2008 budget with Special Tribunal funding included, Siniora reported that he was pleased with the eight-hour meeting of the Council of Ministers on October 27. Topics covered included the 2008 budget, oil and transportation policies, and draft bills. He remarked that never before has the GOL discussed policies, but instead focused only on measures. The current government, in contrast, has managed to send over 120 important bills to Parliament (even though the Parliament is not meeting).

FIRES DESTROYING YEARS OF TREE PLANTING

¶17. (SBU) Siniora relayed his deep concern regarding the devastation caused by Lebanon's fires, saying that the fires destroyed more of the forest than that which has been planted over the last 17 years. Currently the GOL is working with a reforestation NGO and would appreciate any support the USG could offer. (Note: the Ambassador made a disaster declaration to carry out clean up and reforestation in two of

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the affected areas, and post is investigating an offer from the U.S. Forest Service for additional assistance. End Note)

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